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## Do Social Media Enhance Constructive Employee Voice All of the Time or Just Some of the Time?

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# **Do Social Media Enhance Constructive Employee Voice All of the Time or Just Some of the Time?**

## **ABSTRACT**

Social media are becoming widely adopted by organizations to encourage collaboration and communication. We seek to understand how social media can enhance employee voice and employees' willingness to engage in constructive dialogue with both colleagues and managers. By drawing on literature on employee voice, signalling theory and personal control to analyse qualitative data from research into three strategic business units in a major global telecommunications corporation, we find: (1) employee perceptions of personal control and autonomy influence whether and how employees' exercise voice through social media; (2) these perceptions vary according to different organizational/field-level contexts evident in the corporation.

## INTRODUCTION

Powerful social media, including online blogs<sup>1</sup>, micro-blogging<sup>2</sup>, social networking sites<sup>3</sup>, wikis<sup>4</sup>, media sharing sites and gaming technologies, have become increasingly accessible through mobile technology (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These media are being widely adopted by the human resources (HR) function in e-HR, talent management, communications and learning and knowledge management strategies (Kristl Davison, Maraist & Bing, 2011; London & Hall, 2011; Martin, Reddington & Kneafsey, 2009; Reddington & Francis, 2011). In doing so, the function seeks to transform its contribution to the economic and social aims of organizations (Bissola & Impertori, 2014; Marler, 2009; Martin, Reddington & Alexander, 2008; Parry & Solidaro, 2013). The case for this is typically articulated as: (a) encouraging collaboration and engagement among employees, customers, suppliers and partners; (b) sharing knowledge to create organizational learning; (c) helping organizations communicate with a new (virtual)-generation of employees who have grown up with such media; (d) helping organizations, employees and potential employees learn more about each other; and (e) giving customers, business partners and employees more opportunity to exercise ‘voice’ on key issues (Lai & Turban, 2008; Martin et al, 2009).

Such promises rest on three, essentially managerialist, arguments for enhancing employee voice (Budd & Bhawe, 2008; Fox, 1985). First, managers can use such media to encourage individuals to exercise direct voice rather than collective voice through union channels (Bryson, Charlwood & Forth, 2006), as social media are open to all employees with access to the Internet. Second, managers wish employees to engage directly in dialogue with

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<sup>1</sup> Blog/weblog: discussion site consisting of a series of discrete entries, usually displayed in reverse chronological order.

<sup>2</sup> Microblog: allows users to post small elements of content such as short sentences (e.g. Twitter)

<sup>3</sup> Website designed for the purpose of social networking (e.g. Facebook)

<sup>4</sup> Web application that allows used to post or modify content in collaboration with others (e.g Wikipedia).

managers, to share information with colleagues and, in some situations, participate in decision-making (Martin et al., 2009). Third, employee voice is a potential alternative to employee exit, so may help arrest organizational decline (Hirschman, 1970; Batt, Colvin & Keefe, 2002).

Despite the growing HR interest in social media, there is little academic evidence to support these claims for their impact on voice (Klass et al., 2012), perhaps because of their uncritical managerialist assumptions. This gap gives rise to our research question: how, and in what circumstances, can social media be used to enhance employee voice and employees' willingness to engage in constructive dialogue in their organizations? By constructive dialogue, we refer to dialogical interactions through which actors seek to *cooperate* with one another rather than dialectical interactions through which opposition between actors is reinforced (MacIntosh, Beech & Martin, 2012). To answer this question we integrate insights from *signalling theory* in HR and the effect of *personal control* felt by employees on their willingness to exercise voice and their perceptions of social media as a means of helping them do so (Martin & Groen-in't-Woud, 2011; Tangirala & Ramaujam, 2008). This integration allows us to develop four sub-questions concerning the influence of exogenous and endogenous contexts on the voice outcomes of the implementation of social media in practice.

To address these, we use in-depth interview data from a within-case comparison of three strategic business units (SBUs) within a large global telecommunications company. These data highlight the importance of leadership signals regarding social media as a pre-condition for socially constructive employee voice and the importance of key exogenous and endogenous influences in how they are read. Our contributions to the HR literature on social media and employee voice are: (1) to develop earlier theory by linking signalling theory to

personal control, employee voice and engagement (Brockner et al., 2004; Morrison, 2011; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), and (2) to show how social media use is embedded in key internal and external contexts in organisations.

### **Employee Voice, Signalling Theory and Personal Control as Influences on the Potential Use of Social Media in Organizations**

Most research on employee voice is an extension of Hirschman's (1970) work, which saw voice as a human tendency to express discontent by generally 'kicking up a fuss' (p.30).

Thus Budd (2014: 477) sees employee voice as expressing opinions and having meaningful input into work-related decision-making', which includes 'individual and collective voice, union and non-union voice, and voice mechanisms that cover not only employment terms, but also work autonomy and business issues. As such it is concerned with (1) whether to 'speak up' or remain silent (Rees, Alfes & Gatenby, 2013), (2) whether voice is exercised in a socially- constructive manner to improve decision-making (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008) or as a form of retributive justice (Klass et al, 2012), and (3) the extent to which employees enjoy democratic rights in their organizations and are able to exercise control or task autonomy in their work situations (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011). There is a considerable literature on these topics (Morrison, 2011), particularly concerning employees' motivations to express voice, and the situational factors that determine individual behaviour, (Klass et al, 2012). Outside of the US I/O Psychology dominated literature, voice is usually explored as a collective phenomenon and linked to employee participation in decision-making (Bryson et al, 2006; Budd, Gollan & Wilkinson, 2010; Wilkinson & Fay, 2011). Unfortunately, individual and collective levels of analysis are rarely combined because of the different methodological inclinations and

interests of researchers concerning practical relevance (Nicolai & Seidl, 2010). In this paper we combine them to explain the potential relationship between social media and employee voice at the individual and collective levels, and to set out some further lines of enquiry for research on this topic.

### **Signalling theory and employee voice**

Signalling theory has been used to explain the nature of organizations communications (e.g. Highhouse *et al.*, 2007). Much of this research focuses on the *honesty* of signallers, especially on how signals are interpreted by receivers, and the potential of signallers to *fake* honesty (Durcikova & Gray, 2009). Signaller honesty refers to the ‘extent to which the signaller actually has the unobservable quality being signalled’ (Connelly et al, 2011:46). From an HR perspective, ‘inferior signallers’ are often motivated by employers’ intentions to cheat to convince employees they are sending genuine and believable messages. The honesty of signallers and signals, and the overall effectiveness of the signalling process appears to be contingent on the characteristics of receivers, most importantly, *receiver attention*, how *receivers scan the environment* for such signals, and how *signallers interpret and act on signals* (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Thus, if a receiver is not actively looking for signals, the process will probably be ineffective. This is even more probable when weak or mixed-message signals are sent (Ilmola and Kuusi, 2006). Moreover, receivers are more likely to attend to future signals if they have applied previous signals successfully to make choices (Cohen and Dean, 2005).

### **Voice and Personal control**

Much of the psychological literature on voice begins from the contention that voice is preferable to exit (Hirschman, 1970), so is often aimed at discovering individual or

situational antecedents of employee voice. One such antecedent is employee perceptions/ beliefs about their personal control over being able to express views freely. Thus, Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) have identified two complementary theories of the relationships between voice and personal control. The first is dissatisfaction-based voice, seen as an alternative to exit when employees feel unhappy at work and have the freedom to ‘speak up to power’. The second extends Hirschman’s ideas by proposing that employees will exercise voice only if they believe their voice will be listened to and acted on by managers. Thus, Tangirala and Ramanujam argued that personal control combines two related concepts: *autonomy* (employees’ freedom to act and express opinions) and *impact* (perceptions among employees concerning control over important work-related outcomes). These researchers found that the relationship between personal control and employee voice was U-shaped. At low levels of perceived personal control, employees showed an increasing unwillingness to give voice to problems. Beyond a mid-point, however, willingness to exercise voice increased as employees’ perceptions of personal control increased. Thus, employees with high levels of personal control who also identified with their organizations exercised stronger voice, while employees with low levels of personal control who did not identify with their organizations were less likely to exercise voice.

In building on this relationship between personal control and voice, we also acknowledge Hirschman’s (1970) insights that: (a) loyalty (defined as a ‘strong attachment to an organization’ (p. 78)) is necessary because it neutralized individuals’ likelihood of exit, but (b) organizations seeking too much loyalty to prevent employees from leaving would result in stifling voice. Thus we propose that, while high employee engagement, the modern-day equivalent of Hirschman’s concept of loyalty, might have short run benefits for managers, it might also lead to long run disadvantages in stifling both voice and exit. By



employee engagement, we draw on Albrecht, Bakker, Gruman, Macey & Saks' (2015:11) view that this concept fundamentally refers to employees' 'energy, involvement and willingness to contribute to organizational success'.

***The role of social media in voice.*** Social media are often introduced to facilitate honest signalling from the perspective of signallers *and* receivers, and are believed to provide employees with higher levels of personal control by facilitating two-way flows of information, ideas and opinions (Morrison, 2011), improve relational engagement (Heikkilä, 2010), and to change how different forms of voice are perceived by employees and managers (Klass et al., 2012). Thus, by giving employees greater access to networked communications channels, it is presumed that managers can improve the honesty of signals by enabling all employees, individually and collectively, openly or anonymously, to express opinions, share suggestions and for managers to demonstrate that these suggestions are being listened to. However, Klass et al (2012) and Richards (2008) also pointed out that social media can facilitate justice retribution voice, whereby employees can either seek (a) revenge for categorical wrong by employers, or (b) 'just deserts' to restore relative employer injustice by securing proportional 'compensation' from managers through material or symbolic action. Such revenge is likely to be seen by managers as particularly damaging to the reputation of the organization (Gerber & Jackson, 2013).

***The importance of context and embeddedness.*** How leadership signals are interpreted and acted upon by employees are embedded in interconnected levels of organizational, field and societal contexts (Thornton et al, 2012). We have already highlighted one such feature of the organizational context - levels of employee engagement with the organization. However, researchers have also found that levels of existing familiarization with, and prior adoption of, social media will be influential (Martin et al,

2009). Similarly, at the field level the nature of technological expertise in the industry is also likely to be influential (Martin & Reddington, 2010). Finally, the state of the field-level labour market is likely to condition employees' willingness to speak up to power (Bryson, 2006), because it influences individual and collective power and the willingness of employees to use it (Budd et al, 2010) and/ or by making exit a more or less difficult prospect for dissatisfied individuals (Hirschman, 1970). Thus, we propose that these different levels of context will have a marked but differential effect on social media implementation in different contexts.

At a societal level, institutional explanations are relevant in shedding light on field and organizational contexts. Thus conflicting market and professions institutional logics (Thornton, et al, 2012) have been found to shape employees' sensemaking of leadership and management communications and how they enact such communications through different forms of collaboration (Reay & Hinings, 2009). Moreover, critical turning points in societal level institutions can reverberate throughout a field-level system to exacerbate latent distrust in managerial communications in organizations, evidenced for example, by the effects of Global Financial Crisis (GFC) on creating low levels of trust in the banking and finance field (Gillespie, Hurley, Dietz & Bachman, 2012).

## **Summary**

Thus, we propose that socially constructive employee voice can be enhanced by the introduction of social media if interested employees perceive that these media generate an honest, respectful and open form of dialogue, which aims at ensuring that employees will be listened to and will feel free to express their opinions openly through these media. However, such perceptions inevitably will be shaped by relevant endogenous and exogenous factors in

their work environment, including previous and existing levels of employee engagement with the organization, levels of existing adoption of social media, and external factors that affect their ability to exit the organization if they feel their voice is not being heard.

So, to answer our focal question concerning how and in what circumstances social media can enhance employee voice and their willingness to engage in constructive dialogue, we address four sub-questions:

1. How do senior leaders' signals concerning social media influence employees' accounts of personal control and dialogue in organizations?
2. How do employees' accounts of personal control and leaders' intent shape their perceptions and use of social media?
3. How do employees' perceptions of key internal and external contexts influence their perceptions attitudes and use social media?
4. To what extent do employees' expressions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction-based voice reflexively shape the culture of organizations and the nature of leadership?

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

Since our questions concern the social realities that employees and managers enact, we adopted a social constructionist approach. Social constructionism is appropriate when research focuses on relationships, dialogue and engagement in particular social contexts (Shotter, 1993) and how employees and managers understand themselves and the consequences of these understandings (Shotter, 2006). Thus our purpose was not to produce generalizable findings but to understand these actors' social constructions of reality and behaviours in particular contexts.

Qualitative data was collected from three SBUs of a UK-headquartered multinational corporation. As Eisenhardt and Graebner, (2007: 25) claim, ‘case studies emphasize the rich, real-world context in which the phenomena occur’ and are one of the best methods of developing theory by iterating current theoretical knowledge with new data. In this case, all three SBUs were at different stages of social media adoption, described in more detail below. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with managers and employees in two stages. First, 12 exploratory interviews were undertaken with (a) corporate-level managers who held central responsibility for strategy, (b) functional managers in HR and communications, and (c) an external communications consultant and union representative, to gain insights into internal and external contexts of the corporation and the SBUs. Second, 21 interviews were conducted with approximately four senior leaders and three employees in various grades/ functions in each of the three SBUs. These focused on how leaders and employees perceived social media and how they enacted their perceptions regarding the introduction, implementation and outcomes of social media. Care was taken to secure a similar number of interviewees from each SBU to avoid unnecessary bias. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Once interviews were completed, a multi-stage coding process was undertaken, involving a group coding session on a sample of interviews to identify emergent themes. Using this preliminary framework, the transcriptions were then coded and analysed using NVivo. When interviews from one SBU was analysed, the coding was revised by the research team. The remaining interviews were then coded, with themes added as required. Comparisons were then undertaken between the different groups and across the different SBUs.

## **Case Study Context**

***Organizational Context.*** The corporation provided communications and IT services to consumers and businesses in 170 countries, employing 150,000 people with 110,000 in the UK. It had faced frequent internal crises, leading to rapid changes in senior management and an increased emphasis on cost-reduction. However, it was also regarded as a technologically sophisticated organization that invested heavily in R & D to produce a number of world ‘firsts’ in telecommunications and IT. The corporations’ communications included weekly email briefings, management summits, strategy road shows and ‘town-hall’ meetings. An internal corporate-wide employee satisfaction survey was also conducted yearly, with results reported for the individual SBUs. These mechanisms were managed within a standardised framework across the corporation but implemented locally by SBUs. The selection of the three SBUs as research sites was based on two internal factors: the extent to which SBUs had experimented with social media; and extent of previous SBU levels of employee engagement, which we assumed would significantly influence employee voice in each SBU.

Employee engagement was assessed in two ways. The first was the quarterly employee engagement survey, which covered, inter alia, perceptions of senior managers, performance management systems and general wellbeing of the staff. Specific questions included: whether individuals felt empowered and engaged; pride in the organisation; perceptions of business change; whether individuals felt able to exercise voice; whether senior leaders provided a clear sense of direction; and whether people felt motivated by messages concerning the future of the company. Second, as part of the first stage interviews, themes and data arising from the survey were explored to inform relative levels of engagement across the different units. Using these data sources, engagement in the SBUs were categorised as high, modest or low (see Table 1).

*Table 1 about here*

SBU1 was responsible for IT and network development. It employed 18,000 desk-based, ‘knowledge’ workers, with a management team that had pioneered social media inside and outside the corporation. SBU2 was responsible for IT and network operations and also employed 18,000 people, including a substantial workforce of field technicians. SBU3 was a sales and marketing unit discharging the corporations’ wholesale business, employing 4000 people in sales, marketing, product, operational and customer service functions. While the corporation retained responsibility for developing overall policy, strategy and governance, each SBU had its executive board that implemented corporate and unit strategies. HR was also devolved to SBUs, which implemented their own policies on employee engagement, employee participation, employee resourcing, learning and development and communications.

Prior to the research, the corporation had undertaken an organization-wide launch of social media to improve employee engagement and collaboration. Moreover, the technological nature of the business lent itself to the adoption and use of these media, since approximately one third of the workforce was employed in IT delivery and operations, and most others were computer-literate. The corporation structured job roles around ‘*professional communities of interest*’ (COIs) by grouping employees according to specialist skills.

Some of the newly appointed leaders of these COIs were early adopters of social media, energetically diffusing its mission across the corporation to remain at the leading edge of technological adoption. In addition, the company was highly dependent upon knowledge workers, 11,000 of whom worked from home as a result of the corporations’

flexible working policies. Internal adoption was driven by a new Group CIO and a ‘refreshed’ IT management team, one of whom had previously exploited social media and was considered an ‘outspoken advocate’ for these media. The objectives of adopting social media were described variously in in-house publications as: ‘demonstrating our aptitude is high’, to ‘use what we sell’ and exploit social media internally to ‘be faster, and more agile’.

Firstly, blogs and podcasts<sup>5</sup> were used in leadership communications, supported by blogging policies, guidelines and tools. Secondly, existing communication channels were extended to include RSS news-feeds<sup>6</sup>, web chats and webcasts. Thirdly, an internal version of Wikipedia<sup>7</sup> and Facebook<sup>8</sup>, and the existing online news service was extended to facilitate internal discussion and collaboration, which were widely adopted and led by the professional COIs. Fourthly, video podcasts were also piloted to as part of the learning and development agenda. Finally, Second-Life<sup>9</sup> style avatars were developed as part of a ‘social media talent academy’, with strong central encouragement concerning its use.

***Field-level Context.*** The three SBUs operated in the UK wholesale telecoms sector, considered one of the largest wholesale markets of its type in the world. The corporation was *the* major player in this field, competing with other large telecoms companies, infrastructure providers and equipment vendors in an increasingly consolidated market. It also had a regulated business providing services to 500 communications providers. Globally, the corporation provided organisations with managed IT and communications solutions and services. Whilst this £1000bn market was de-regulated, there was strong competition and a

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<sup>5</sup> Digital audio file made available for download via the internet

<sup>6</sup> RSS (“Rich Site Summary”): summary of different websites compiled into a single news feed.

<sup>7</sup> Free open content online encyclopedia created through collaborative effort of the user community.

<sup>8</sup> Social networking site

<sup>9</sup> A 3D virtual world for social networking via the use of avatars.

constant risk of revenue and/or margin erosion, particularly during times of austerity where businesses were likely to defer investment or develop their own capability.

***Societal-level Context.*** The corporation began as British publically owned utility but was privatized in the mid-1980s. Thus, despite the market-logic and shareholder value-orientation that dominated much of UK industry in the 1980s (Lok, 2010), a bureaucratic logic still remained, reflected in high levels of unionisation and job security that prevailed for much of the period following its privatisation. This contrasted with the rest of the sector, which had low union density and had experienced extensive lay-offs. Finally data collection was undertaken during the GFC, which had a negative effect on the fortunes of the corporation, as measured by a marked fall in its share price.

## FINDINGS

Our first question asked how senior leaders' signals on social media influenced employees' perceptions of personal control and dialogue? In response, we generally found that leaders and employees' accounts stressed the constructive dialogue generated by these media in the professional COIs in line with the espoused intentions of senior leaders to promote collaborative working and to develop employees' capabilities as illustrated by a quote from a COI leader:

*“People can ask questions, they have contacts, they need help or whatever, we’ve seen a lot more people use discussion and advice from people so one thing it does give you is access to a wider group of people who can help you, and I think ultimately that is a really good thing, because often getting a problem resolved quickly in an organisation it’s all about speed to market and getting things resolved quickly”*



We identified four themes in the transcripts concerning constructive dialogue, again mainly in those from the professional COIs interviews. These were collaboration, contact, learning and professional development, all of which were aligned with the espoused values of the corporation, and which are summarised with further illustrative quotes in Table 2.

*Table 2 about here*

Among other groups, however, employees' accounts of leaders' use of social media were more critical, stressing inconsistency between leader rhetoric and how they saw social in practice. Thus some leaders were seen to be using social media because they felt that they had to be 'seen to be doing something' to follow company policy, or as an alternative to face-to-face communication (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

This inconsistency led to increased employee cynicism in the form of comments by interviewees that social media gave leaders an opportunity to *"hide behind technologies where it's a little bit more one way"* (Interviewee SBU2) and thus *"escape honest conversations"*, to *"almost abdicate their responsibility for face to face communications"* (Interviewee SBU2). Interestingly, it became clear from interviews with three managers in SBU1 that they had little interest in using social media and did not embrace the ethos of open dialogue espoused by the corporation, as illustrated by this next comment from one SBU leader:

*"I definitely think the old 'back to the floor'...approach is good as well, and I don't think it should replace that",*

As Table 3 also shows, our interviews with employees pointed to three further ways in which they saw leaders subvert the official rhetoric: using social media to communicate

what they saw variously as propaganda, opting out of debate or suppressing debate, all of which further increased employee cynicism.

Our data also point to organizational context in the different SBUs being influential in shaping these negative perceptions held by employees. Thus, while leadership style at middle and senior levels was an important influence on how employees accounted for social media, employees' accounts varied across SBUs. While employees generally saw middle managers as failing to engage with the new media in all three SBUs (table 4), their explanations of why varied across SBUs. In SBU3 employees typically saw social media as part of senior leaders' remit, whereas in SBU1 and SBU2 employees believed that middle managers felt threatened by these media. In SBU2, concerns were expressed about having lack of time to use them.

*Table 4 about here*

Variation in senior leaders styles also accounted for differences in employees' perceptions and adoption of social media, and the extent to which employees' felt their voice was heard in the different SBUs (table 5). In SBU1 the CEO was deemed to be autocratic and uncomfortable with allowing employees the type of voice and engagement that social media were intended to enhance. In SBU3 the leader's lack of familiarity with the new media was perceived to have had a negative impact on its use. Only in SBU2 was leadership style seen to encourage employees to speak up and exercise genuine voice.

*Insert table 5 about here*

Our second question was: how did employees' perceptions of personal control and communications intent shape their perceptions of the new social media and the manner in which they use it? In line with our earlier discussion of personal control (Tamgitala & Ramaujam, 2008), the interviews suggested that employees used social media in a socially

constructive manner according to the degree to which they felt free to exercise voice and that what they said might be acted on. Thus, we expected to find that levels of employee engagement and the degree of adoption of social media in the different SBUs might be related to personal control. Our data from SBU1, which was described as having low employee engagement, appeared to confirm our expectations, since employees appeared reluctant to speak up through social media. However, in SBU2 and 3, which had higher levels of employee engagement, employees appeared to feel more able and willing to exercise voice but not necessarily through social media (Table 6).

*Table 6 about here*

This is an important finding, suggesting that contextual factors might have been important, which leads to our third question: how did employees' perceptions of key internal and external contexts influence their perceptions of personal control, their attitudes to social media and their use of such media? As suggested earlier, our interviews identified a number of contextual factors that affect employees' perceptions of their autonomy or personal control. We have categorised these as exogenous changes, generated by societal and field-level contexts, and endogenous changes, generated inside the corporation and in relations between and within SBUs.

The first endogenous factor emerging from the interviews was of the sense of belonging to an online community (see Table 7). However, a comparison across SBUs in Table 7 suggests that engaged employees were not, as we anticipated, necessarily willing to exercise voice through social media. For example, in SBU3, despite the generally high employee engagement, employees were reluctant to use social media if they were not already engaged with the online community. In SBU1 and 2 employees connected with different types of

online interventions – at the level of the team for SBU1 and for parallel organisational networks for SBU2.

*Table 7 about here*

The second endogenous factor was the existing norms, values and attitudes to social media held by leaders and employees, which we term the social media sub-culture.

Interviewees suggested that the ways in which people perceived the existing social media sub-culture and the associated organizational development initiatives that had supported the introduction of social media had an important influence on further innovation and use of these media. Table 8 below shows how the social media sub-culture was viewed in each of the three SBUs. Interestingly, levels of employee engagement appeared to have no direct relationship with employees' perception of the social media sub-culture. In SBU3, which reported the highest levels of employee engagement, interviewees felt as though their conversations on social media were being closed down. In SBU2, with moderate employee engagement, the leaders had been coached to invest in dialogue, and this translated into higher employee engagement with their leaders.

*Table 8 about here*

The most important endogenous context raised by employees during the second stage of interviews was the GFC and its impact on the corporation in general (see Table 9). Most notably, interviewees in all three SBUs felt that the GFC had restricted the level of debate on social media, particularly with regard to dissatisfaction-based voice. This appeared to be evident regardless of the use of social media or level of employee engagement.

*Table 9 about here*

Our fourth question concerned the extent that employees' expressions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction-based voice provided feedback into communications culture and leadership.

An important though not widespread criticism by managers was that social media were used by some employees to exact retributive justice or revenge (Klass et al, 2012). Thus one middle manager saw them as people who *“think they have a right to an opinion”, which had “spiralled out of control” into “big moan forums”*. Another leader complained *“a lot of them feel like whinges at times so it comes across as complaining and that isn’t as well received”*. Some leaders also believed that employees who chose to remain anonymous were hiding behind social media to get back at managers: *“when people find their voice through this technology...they have more of an emotional response through the technology... people might be swearing in their comments or very emotional...because they feel it is hidden”* and that these sentiments could be *“offensive to some people”*. In a similar vein, another leader felt that the questions were becoming *“increasingly challenging” and “extreme”*. For example senior leaders complained about *“angry responses”* to CEO postings, while others felt that people were *“bitching and moaning”* through personal attacks on senior leadership. These views were echoed by other managers in the organization. This hiding-behind- the-media perspective was summarised by one leader who suggested employees framed the situation in terms of *‘I’m not gonna meet them so I can say whatever I like’*.

However, according to some managers, company-sponsored media were not the main channel for retributive justice, which tended to be exacted in external online discussions on external social networking sites or ‘underground’ media. Conversations on these media were described as *“very vociferous”*, providing *“some very honest views on things”*, in contrast to the typical conversations on the in-house social media where doubts were expressed *“..... about just how realistic the conversation coming from the workers to the upper ranks really*

is”. One interviewee summed up the nature of typical conversations on company media as “*stilted*” and a “*bit one-way*”.

Despite this evidence of dissatisfaction-based voice as a form of retributive justice, the general consensus was that these episodes were the exception rather than the rule. Thus, one of the newly appointed members of the IT management team claimed that social media created a sense of restorative justice (Klass et al, 2012) by making ‘... *the management decision more transparent...open to question...it protects, it legitimises and it enables people to keep an eye on what is going on...people feel empowered and their voice is heard*’

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

We addressed four questions concerning the impact of social media on employee voice. The first examined the impact of senior leadership signals on employees’ perceptions of personal control and the nature of communications in their business units. Our data suggested that the honesty of leadership signals would influence personal control, in so far as employees felt free to respond in a socially constructive manner, and believed their voice would have impact. Employees attributed a great deal of significance to leaders’ signals and styles regarding whether social media would influence their autonomy and willingness to exercise voice. This was accounted for by how leaders acted out the espoused intentions for introducing social media, which were to promote collaborative working, develop employees and encourage dialogue rather than competing monologues between leaders and employees. We found mixed messages were both signalled by leaders and received as such by employees. On the one hand, both leaders and employees, mainly in professional COIs, cited positive examples of social media use in line with the espoused intentions of the corporation. On the other, leaders’ signals were also interpreted negatively by employees, mainly outside of the COIs, in all three SBUs. For example, leaders were seen to be ‘box ticking’ and using

the media to suppress rather than encourage voice. Again, in line with the literature on the importance of honest signals in shaping employee perceptions, the role of middle managers was also deemed to be influential. Middle managers were typically viewed as disengaged from the process of promoting social media, although the contexts of the different SBUs were important in explaining such disengagement.

The second question asked how employees' perceptions of personal control and communications intent shaped their perceptions and use of the new social media. Interviews suggested that employees' use of these media in a socially constructive manner was influenced by how free they felt to speak up and the extent that what they said would have impact. The organizational context of SBUs, particularly levels of employee engagement, appeared important in understanding employees' views on their autonomy and impact. Nevertheless, high engagement and freedom to exercise voice did not necessarily translate into willingness to use social media to do so. Instead, we have to look to other contextual factors to understand this somewhat counterintuitive finding.

This point leads us to our third question: the influence of external and internal contexts on perceptions of personal control, attitudes to social media and use of such media. Here, employees' perceptions of being to an *online community* appeared to be important in addition to what we have labelled as a *social media sub-culture* rather than engagement with the organization as such. This finding was most evident in the professional COIs, suggesting that prior knowledge and experience of social media in these communities and the type of organizational socialisation of members into using the new social media may have been important.

This finding reflects Martin and Reddington's (2009) proposition that the adoption, diffusion and exploitation of new technology in HR is influenced by: (1) organizational

cultures that are highly connected by previous cognate technologies and commit new members into past policies on technology adoption, and (2) prior knowledge and experience of complementary technologies that fit with the identities of group members. Both factors help explain why social media adoption was associated with constructive online dialogue among professional COIs and conversely more critical perceptions among employees in business units who were not members of COIs.

Significantly, exogenous factors overlaid these endogenous explanations. Neo-institutionalism has shown how employees' interpretations of events are deeply embedded in institutional logics, which are influenced by critical turning points such as the GFC (Thornton et al, 2012). Our interviews showed that GFC had a marked effect on restricting voice through social media because of worries over job security, while at field-level the state of the labour market was also perceived to have an important impact.

The fourth question concerned the impact of employees' satisfaction or dissatisfaction-based voice on the communications culture of organizations and leadership, and how such feedback influenced the process of social media implementation in the SBUs. Interviewees, especially middle managers and senior leaders, pointed to employees expressing dissatisfaction-based voice; however, managers tended to dismiss such expressions as 'hiding behind the technology' rather than accepting the points being made, suggesting a failure to listen and engage in respectful dialogue (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

We can conclude from our study that, while social media may be introduced within an organization with the intention of increasing employee voice, this will not necessarily be the actual outcome. Context matters in shaping this relationship in predictable and less predictable ways (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). To return to the question posed in the title of this paper, our data can be interpreted as follows: social media is likely to enhance socially



constructive employee voice only some of the time, and principally among those groups that were initially pre-disposed to its adoption. We explained this conclusion in terms of the honesty of signals, how employees perceived these signals, and their perceptions of personal control and autonomy, all of which are embedded in specific institutional and organizational contexts. Thus we found that (a) different levels of staff engagement, (b) history of management-employee communications at the organizational levels, (c) employee perceptions of the external labour market for their kinds of skills, and (d) alternative employment prospects outside of their employing units were important in shaping how employees interpreted and enacted social media. Perhaps most significantly, we also believe that groups which have prior knowledge and experience of technology and social media and a history of using such media to enable dialogue will be more likely to use it to exercise voice (Martin & Reddington, 2009).

Our study poses three lines of enquiry for organizations intending to introduce new social media for communication with a view to improving dialogue between employees and managers. The first concerns the honesty of signals sent out by senior leaders and middle managers on respectful dialogue, which appears to be a prerequisite for employees to feel free to 'kick up a fuss' (Hirschman, 1970). We also argue that this somewhat linear view of signalling theory is limited and limiting. From a social constructionist perspective, the idea of a social reality as an honest signal cannot be seen as separate from employees' identities and frames of reference or interpretation (Thornton et al, 2012), and how they enact through talk the nature of signallers and signals. This insight is important because it raises the possibility that senior leaders are unable to control meaning because it is a relational and contested phenomenon in organizations. Indeed, much of the literature on employment relations has focused on the issue of how the language and meanings that employees and

managers use in their everyday talk and text shapes organizational reality and brings it into existence (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Moreover, such language has multiple meanings for different groups of employees in different cultural contexts and time frames (Watson, 2011). Consequently, respectful dialogue - talking *with* people - rather than monologue, - talking *to* people - is needed to enable meaningful voice in organizations (Cunliffe, 2008).

A second line of further enquiry concerns the too-much-of-a-good thing effect in HRM in general and employee voice in particular (Pierce & Aguinias, 2013). As Hirschman (1970) argued, too much loyalty can stifle constructive voice. Thus one might ask: to what extent can organizations take steps to avoid over-engagement because critical employee voice might serve them better in the long run? So, what implications does this have for social media implementation in organizations? The third possible line of enquiry is that regardless of these micro-level analyses and prescriptions, context matters in the impact of social media on employee voice, especially institutional contexts beyond managers' control. This is a lesson that seems to have been forgotten in much of the literature in psychologically oriented HRM, which focuses almost exclusively on the micro-foundations of behaviour (Godard, 2014) and is rooted in unitary assumptions (Fox, 1985). We believe that explanations of employee engagement and feelings of personal control and autonomy are likely to be deeply embedded in field and societal institutions, which constrain the ability of managers and employees to make significant change in organizational culture (Thornton et al, 2012).

Finally, we have to acknowledge the limitations of our study, most importantly the use of a single case study and its generalizability to other organizational settings. However, the within-case approach has allowed us to gain a richer view of how social media are actually used and the influence of context, which is not always possible using large sample,

survey studies. We propose that future research may wish to take some of these insights to examine the use and impact of social media across a wider range of organizations and contexts.

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**Table 1: The Levels of Social Media Adoption and Employee Engagement of the Three Business Units**

	BU1	BU2	BU3
Employee Engagement level	Low	Moderate	High
Social media adoption	High	Moderate	Low

**Table 2: Positive uses of social media**

Used for:	Illustrative quotation:
Collaboration	<i>“(wikis act as) a community...where we can have a sharing of ideas, and...more...social networking but applied in a work environment, based...around...the common theme...wikis are a little more interactive, in terms of being able to manipulate the data, turning it more into information and then making that...available for people” (Leader)</i>
Contact	<i>‘(the technology helps to) find ways to chat over the water fountain or cooler, and not (need to) see people everyday’ (Research and Development employee)</i>
Learning	<i>“anyone can become a tutor and teach other people something and that was the environment we wanted to create...people can consume the content when they want to consume and everyone can become involved in creating the content, and helping other people...” (Middle-manager)</i>
Professional Development	<i>“I was using that more from a personal development, but I did actually find it particularly useful, particularly the point I was at. I was almost finishing one career and starting another one, and I was looking to get re-trained...get my get my professional qualifications, and I did actually find it very useful...” (Middle-manager)</i>

**Table 3: Factors impacting on employee voice**

Topic / Theme	Exemplary Quotation
<p>Propaganda</p> <p>Used to perpetuate the company line or for self-promotion</p>	<p><i>"I have been on blogs where it is clearly a management propaganda tool...it is sunny and upbeat and it never rains...people just see it as just another media medium for management to get the message across"</i></p>
<p>Opting Out</p> <p>Leaders choose not to engage with the technology, or choose to 'ghost-write' their contributions</p>	<p><i>"it isn't...something that [business unit CEO] actually writes [themselves]"</i></p>
<p>Suppress Debate</p> <p>Leaders suppress debate through agenda setting, the nature of their responses, taking the discussion offline or other controls</p>	<p><i>"someone was taken aside...to say...what you're putting on there is a bit much yeah, rein it in"</i></p>
	<p><i>"we generally try and close things down...what we will try and do is answer in such a way that no one else feels they should comment on it, or ask another question...generally the response has been one of try and close it down rather than allow it to run and run and let people have their say..."</i></p>
	<p><i>"leaders tend to lead the subject areas for debate...I don't know how much an individual could set the agenda"</i></p>
	<p><i>"we definitely screen questions to make sure that they're not inappropriate...sometimes we have the name of the individual supplied and we will...contact them offline...to close it but not embarrass them by putting it out publicly...if you didn't screen it...people would be disciplined...and the business people screen it so we can reject what's coming in as well"</i></p>
<p>Seen To Be Doing Something</p> <p>Leaders adopt the technology for the sake of it</p>	<p><i>"the comms guys...put this forward...you know we must drive more of the debate you know onto this kind of media"</i></p>
<p>Alternative To Face-to-Face</p> <p>Leaders use the technology as an alternative to face-to-face communication</p>	<p><i>"I don't have to travel all over the country all of the time, which is a clear benefit, I am quite busy and it eats up your time...in terms of me going over there and talking to people...it takes a big bite out of your calendar"</i></p>

**Table 4: Organizational actors**

		Business Unit # 1	Business Unit # 2	Business Unit # 3
		Employee Engagement <b>LOW</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>HIGH</b>	Employee Engagement <b>MODEST</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MODERATE</b>	Employee Engagement <b>HIGH</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MINIMAL</b>
Contextual Condition		Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Exemplary Quote
Actors	Middle-managers	In this business unit, middle-managers were not seen to engage with Enterprise2.0	In this business unit, middle-managers were not seen to engage with Enterprise2.0	In this business unit, middle-managers were not seen to engage with Enterprise2.0
How people perceive the actions of various organisational actors and the impact it could have	The role that people perceive managers (including middle managers or supervisors) or management style of the organisation can affect the interventions, or the way it does affect the intervention	<p><i>"...they don't publicly blog in the same way...I think the tension there comes from who is controlling the flow of information...you do come across people who say well who said that, where have you found that out from ...and (that) would cause somebody at that level to try and shut it down...intervene in the conversation which...defies the perception of openness"</i></p>	<p><i>"...they just don't basically play ball, refuse to use it, I haven't got time for that, some people can feel threatened by certain things, or exposed..."</i></p>	<p><i>"I see much more of a drive and a push for blogging from the senior managers, I don't see so much in my teams, so yeah...my (direct reports) might have their own sites, (but) I don't see them automatically setting up their own...blogs"</i></p>

**Table 5: Leaders**

		Business Unit # 1	Business Unit # 2	Business Unit # 3
		Employee Engagement <b>LOW</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>HIGH</b>	Employee Engagement <b>MODEST</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MODERATE</b>	Employee Engagement <b>HIGH</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MINIMAL</b>
Contextual Condition		Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote
<p><b>Actors</b></p> <p>How people perceive the actions of various organisational actors and the impact it could have</p>	<p><b>Leaders</b></p> <p>The role that people perceive leaders or the leadership style of the organisation can affect the interventions, or the way it does affect the intervention</p>	<p><b>In this business unit, people felt that the autocratic leadership inhibited online discussion leading to a superficial discussion</b></p> <p><i>"it's a very personal thing, and I think this is about [business unit CEO's] style rather...than the medium...so while [they] would like to be seen as open, accessible and involved in a dialogue, [they] still very much position [themselves] as the person in charge, so therefore if [they]...get a comment on the blog, if [they] (don't) agree with it [they] can be quite sharp in the way that [they] respond...there is a bit of a tension there...it is one thing to be open and to encourage other people to be open, actually not having the right mindset to use it..."</i></p>	<p><b>In this business unit, the emphasis was on 'authentic' leadership adoption</b></p> <p><i>"we very much want the leaders to have their own tone of voice and we very much try to get it so we suggest they put it in their diary say two times a week to look at their blog, or something like that, we prefer them to do it, because we don't think its very authentic if they don't do it, we might give them advice and stuff, but we do, we do (want the message to come from them)..."</i></p>	<p><b>In this business unit, it was felt the leader was not comfortable with the technology and that this inhibited its use</b></p> <p><i>"I think theres a bit of work to be done...for [business unit CEO] to just feel confident of using this as a means of having a conversation with people in [their] business"</i></p>

**Table 6: Safe to speak up**

		Business Unit # 1	Business Unit # 2	Business Unit # 3
		Employee Engagement <b>LOW</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>HIGH</b>	Employee Engagement <b>MODEST</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MODERATE</b>	Employee Engagement <b>HIGH</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MINIMAL</b>
Contextual Condition		Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote
<p><b>Internal</b></p> <p>The way people perceive that specific internal environmental factors, such as culture, could or do affect the interventions</p>	<p><b>Safe To Speak Up</b></p> <p>The way people perceive whether or not it is safe to speak up affects the intervention</p>	<p><b>In this business unit, people were hesitant about speaking up and this was seen as a constraining factor</b></p> <p><i>"I think you are...encouraged to do so, but does it mean its safe, it all depends what you mean by safe, but I still think people tend not to because they are not confident it is safe, its encouraged obviously, but...people would think twice about posting certain things I would have thought "</i></p>	<p><b>In this business unit, whilst people did speak up, this did not translate onto the technology</b></p> <p><i>"when we did the [strategy roadshows] there was a lot more cynicism about [new network] than has come through on the blog you know many of the subjects are the same, you know stuff about spares but comparatively...in a controlled and pleasant way"</i></p>	<p><b>In this business unit, whilst engagement levels were described as high, this did not translate onto the technology</b></p> <p><i>"...what was interesting today is on this...online chat...the two people chose to remain anonymous, so I think there is something there...as people don't feel they can speak up where maybe they could, whereas from [employee engagement survey] they say that they do feel it is safe to speak up, but todays experience would suggest that actually there are some issues that people don't feel confident about, about putting their name to"</i></p>

**Table 7: Belonging to an Online Community**

		Business Unit # 1	Business Unit # 2	Business Unit # 3
		Employee Engagement <b>LOW</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>HIGH</b>	Employee Engagement <b>MODEST</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MODERATE</b>	Employee Engagement <b>HIGH</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MINIMAL</b>
Contextual Condition		Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote
Internal  The way people perceive that specific internal environmental factors, such as culture, could or do affect the interventions	Community  How people perceive the sense of community that exists, or the maturity of existing relationships can affect the intervention	<p><b>In this business unit people felt a closer affiliation to their team, and hence the interventions were seen to be more successful at this level</b></p> <p><i>“it works intra-team I would say (more) than it works up and down”</i></p>	<p><b>In this business unit people felt an affiliation to parallel organisational networks such as management groups, or advocacy networks, and the interventions were seen to be more successful at this level</b></p> <p><i>I have got a sense of...[advocacy network]...the...very nature of the guys who are in the community, are very interested in the technology and trying to engage people in very creative and innovative ways...have got that perspective”</i></p>	<p><b>In this business unit, people did not feel an affiliation to the <i>online</i> organisation and this was seen as a reason the interventions were failing</b></p> <p><i>“feeling part of the community...I don’t think it works for me...if I felt part of the community I would take a view...I tend to be more focused on what I’m doing...I’d rather spend time doing my stuff and my teams stuff rather than wider...maybe the fact the people in [business unit # 3] the interests are just too disparate...”</i></p>

**Table 8: Culture**

		Business Unit # 1	Business Unit # 2	Business Unit # 3
		Employee Engagement <b>LOW</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>HIGH</b>	Employee Engagement <b>MODEST</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MODERATE</b>	Employee Engagement <b>HIGH</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MINIMAL</b>
Contextual Condition		Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote
Internal  The way people perceive that specific internal environmental factors, such as culture, could or do affect the interventions	Culture  The ways in which people perceive the culture has impacted the interventions	<p><b>People do not expect to be heard</b></p> <p><i>“I don’t think they’re unhappy at being challenged but they won’t bend as a result”</i></p>	<p><b>People experience engagement with their leaders</b></p> <p><i>“from the very beginning we coached our leaders to...be appreciative of an open question and often an open or tense question can be a sign...of someone who is very highly frustrated and if answered correctly, they can become an advocate”</i></p>	<p><b>People expect conversation to be closed down</b></p> <p><i>“if someone raises something unpalatable, then the management approach is actually to close it down as quickly as possible”</i></p>

**Table 9: Financial crisis**

		Business Unit # 1	Business Unit # 2	Business Unit # 3
		Employee Engagement <b>LOW</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>HIGH</b>	Employee Engagement <b>MODEST</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MODERATE</b>	Employee Engagement <b>HIGH</b> Enterprise2.0 Adoption <b>MINIMAL</b>
Contextual Condition		Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote	Explanation and Exemplary Quote
External  The way people perceive that specific external environmental factors could or do affect the interventions	Financial Crisis  How people perceive the impact caused by the financial crisis or the consequences within the organisation	<p><b>People felt that the External Financial Crisis was restricting the amount of debate seen on the interventions</b></p> <p><i>"not seen anything controversial...I suppose if people were more confident and we weren't in the climate we are at the moment you may get more... challenging questions, but I think at the moment things are pretty tough and people might be a bit more reserved in the questions that they might ask"</i></p>	<p><b>People felt that the External Financial Crisis was restricting the amount of debate seen on the interventions</b></p> <p><i>"...it could be about the current climate where everyone is a bit afraid about what to say, to say out loud, performance issues, it's a delicate time we are in I think at the moment"</i></p>	<p><b>People felt that the External Financial Crisis was restricting the amount of debate seen on the interventions</b></p> <p><i>"in the current climate where people are thinking you know, you would probably not want to associate yourself on a web site saying [business unit # 3] is rubbish or whatever..."</i></p>